

awkward hearts (beating faster and faster)

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by [limerence \(lavenderGreen\)](#)

Summary

"Well, it's no McMansion," George says diplomatically.

(or: The house that Clay and George live in is maybe kind of a problem, but they work through it anyway. Sort of.)

Notes

chapter + fic titles from [eat sleep wake \(nothing but you\) by bombay bicycle club](#)

so full disclosure, this piece of writing owes a lot to [this bts fanfic](#). i only realized the similarities when i was cleaning out my bookmarks halfway through writing this. i've gone through and rewritten anything too close, so the characterization + end product is totally different in mine. just wanted to be upfront about it. it's one of my favorite fanfics Ever...I've read it about twenty times, i think. so if you like bts, if you like sope, you should

deffo check it out!!

this work is not a reflection of reality, i do not claim to know the real people whom i have turned into characters here, this is more based on 1. their online personas, 2. my own self-projection lol. do not try to share this fic with anybody in mcyt. if any of the real people depicted as characters in this fic express discomfort with having fanfic written about them, this will be taken down.

if you'd like to feature this on a rec list or anything that is fine, but please notify me in my dms/in an ask on my [tumblr](#)!!

ok that should be it, enjoy the story!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

those looks at the start

The house they live in is maybe kind of a problem. George remembers when they first drove out to the outskirts of Jacksonville in Clay's Subaru to go see it, three weeks after Clay's grandma's funeral, when everything in the will had been divvied up and the two of them found themselves with either a blessing or a curse on their hands.

Standing on the cracked pavement, shielding their eyes from the midday sun as they took in what would eventually be their new home.

"Well, it's no McMansion," George says diplomatically.

"I can't believe Grandma held onto this place for so long," Clay mutters. "The property value must be incredible."

The front yard is overrun by a tall tangle of weeds, and even from the pavement, George can feel the itch of grass on his bare shins. Under the sun, the house blares in some garish shade of yellow that makes him squint. He can only imagine what it looks like to non-colorblind people.

"It's just so...decrepit. I don't believe that anybody has ever been inside here," George says as they step through the threshold, which opens directly into the living room, with a cheap-looking shoe rack propped rather precariously against the wall.

"Just like you, then," Clay snorts, then laughs at his own joke like the mean weirdo that he is.

"I can always go apartment-hunting on my own," George grumbles.

"Oh, yeah? You and what stable employment?"

George rolls his eyes.

"You can't tell me that you don't want to live here, not even a little bit."

"Yes, I can."

"For shame, George, my late grandmother leaves this gift to the both of us--"

"--to you--"

"--to both of us, and what do you do?"

"Look at this, Clay!" The shoe rack is the least of their problems. George gestures at the bathroom, which inexplicably has a window facing the living room. No blinds, not even a handle for ventilation, which would presumably be the only reason why you might ever need a window in the bathroom. Just a way for you to make eye contact with your friends while you shit. "This is ridiculous."

But Clay turns to George and he's smiling all over and he says, "I know, right?"

So yeah, the house has some issues. It's fine for the most part, though, and it doesn't hurt that neither of them have to pay rent anymore.

(Not for lack of trying. George scrounges up some of his savings, hands a check to Clay at the end of the month. Clay stares at the paper over his cereal.

"What's this again?" Clay asks, words warped around the spoon in his mouth.

"Rent."

Clay stares at him.

George continues, "It's not a whole lot, but that's about what I can afford to pay you each month, since this is technically your house, and I'm your guest."

"Don't be stupid," Clay says. He slides the check back over to George and goes back to eating his cereal. For better or for worse, George doesn't push it.)

George spends a good week or so neglecting his commissions just to wrangle the worst of the overgrowth on the yard. By the time he's done, it doesn't look that much better, but at least he can actually see the pathway up to the porch now. He unearths a skinny little tree sapling and feels an absurd amount of protectiveness over it.

But for the most part, it's George and Clay together, as it's always been. They install blackout curtains in the bathroom window and then fall over themselves laughing when George realizes that they've gone and installed them on the living room side, instead of in the bathroom.

They go to Goodwill together, they buy about a dozen little rugs and a strange stained-glass table for the dining room--the rugs are to hide the warped wooden floors, the stained-glass table because neither of them have any real regard for practicality. As they carefully bring it up the porch stairs, George nearly splits his skull open when he trips. That's how they find out they have a trick step—a near-death and Clay cackling to himself for the next half an hour about it.

They figure out the breaker box and short out the lights not a few times.

(At which point George finds himself being clung onto by a surprisingly jumpy Clay, who latches onto the back of George's sweatshirt with what feels like both hands as he makes his way back upstairs to find his phone and turn on his flashlight.

"What would you do if right now, you felt something pulling on the back of your shirt?" George jokes.

Clay shudders and sprints up ahead, grabbing George by the wrist and tugging him insistently up the rest of the steps. He doesn't let go until the lights come back on again.)

As they're unpacking, they head to the bedroom and they--

Okay, here's the thing about this house. It's a one-bedroom, and maybe George should've considered that before he agreed to live here with Clay. It feels a little too ghoulish to sleep in Clay's dead grandma's bed in Clay's dead grandma's house, so for a while they slum it on the floor with two air mattresses, five feet apart, until they come to the mutual agreement that they are both grown men well out of their college days, and they really shouldn't be doing that to their backs.

Except, at the mattress store there's a king-size that's 85% off. It's tall, and it has a flowery padded headboard and it's huge. It has maybe the same square footage as one of their shitty little bathrooms. George makes a big show out of flopping down on it.

"I could sail back to England on this," George muses. Clay laughs at him and sits next to George's feet. "What do you think?"

"About you traversing the Atlantic on a mattress?"

"Yes. No, idiot, about the bed."

"I mean--" Clay scratches his head. "It's just the one bed."

"It's just the one bedroom. We're destitute, Clay." George stops then, realizes what he's really asking here. "I guess I could sleep on the futon out in the living room?"

"First of all, no way. I've had enough of you complaining about your back for the rest of my life. Also, that isn't a futon."

"It's not?"

"It's just a really old couch." Clay lies back, stretches his arms out. "This is insane. And it's 85% off?"

"Fellas, is it gay to sleep in the same bed as your homie?"

"Shut up," Clay grumbles. "Fine. Let's just get this one then. But only because of the bargain."

So, that's where they are now. Just a couple of dudes, buying furniture and gardening together, sharing the lease to a house, sleeping in the same bed.

Nick comes over after whining about how he hadn't yet been invited over to their new abode, and he takes his time laughing his ass off at the stupid bathroom curtains. After he comes down, he sees their bedroom and then he's off again.

"It's literally not that big of a deal," George hisses. Nick looks at him and wheezes.

"Tell me, George, do you enjoy hurting yourself on purpose?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." He shuts the bedroom door with a snap and starts downstairs. "Will you be getting the hell out now?"

"Not a chance," Nick says gleefully.

"Children, stop fighting," Clay says from the couch, lying on his back with his arm over his eyes. He'd come back from work sometime during Nick's unceremonious house tour.

"Tell him to stop," George huffs. "And budge over."

"Stop," Clay obliges. He tucks his feet in and George sits down. After a moment, Clay lifts his arm from his face and smiles over at George, eyes tired.

"Hi," Clay says.

"Hello."

"Hi." He puts his feet in George's lap. In the background are the sounds of Nick rummaging through their fridge, which probably has less to do with his actually being hungry and more out of a

general desire to judge both of them for their choices.

George wraps one of his hands around Clay's (socked) feet and rubs his ankle. "Long day?"

"Ugh. Why are people in corporate so stupid?"

"I don't know. I've never dealt with corporate people. I bet it's some mixture of old age, social conservatism, and," George thinks, "asbestos poisoning."

It succeeds in making Clay laugh, although it is strained and exhausted-sounding. "You're probably right. Don't stop doing that." He flexes the ankle in George's grip.

"I think I will, soon. I don't want to awaken some latent fetish in you."

"Nooooooo." Clay wiggles his toes.

"Hey, guys. Your fridge sucks," Nick interrupts, quite loudly, "And speaking of asbestos, are you both quite sure that--"

"Shut up," Clay and George tell him.

Later on, after they say goodbye to Nick, waving him off from the doorway as he drives away, Clay sags down and leans his head on George's shoulder.

"I hate this job," he mumbles. "I hate it so much, George. I don't know why I have to do this. I've been buying coffee for these assholes for two years now, and what have I gotten out of it? Do you want to know what happened today? Ask me what happened today."

"What happened today?" George doesn't put an arm around Clay, but he shifts so his head is more secure on his shoulder.

"I proposed an idea for marketing, just like, off-hand, and my boss yelled at me in front of all the new interns. And you want to know the worst part?"

"What was the worst part, Clay?"

"The worst part is that the guy ended up pitching my idea. He didn't even thank me or like, give me any credit."

"Ugh, I'm sorry," George says, patting the top of Clay's hair placatingly. It's been growing it out as of late—neither of them have had the time to get a haircut, what with the move and all. It looks nice, though, makes him look a little softer and a little more his age.

He makes a noise like a pained animal. George shuts the door and walks inside, and Clay's head lays persistently on his shoulder, matching his footsteps as they shuffle along into the kitchen.

"I want to take a nap in our giant bed," Clay mumbles.

"Then go." George shoos him off and opens the fridge. To look for what, he has no idea because the only things they have in their fridge are the half-full jar of Marmite that he had bought on impulse a few nights ago when he had been drunk and slightly homesick, some stale leftovers, and a few bottles of Gatorade. Maybe Nick is right.

Clay lingers there next to George.

George says, "Somehow, I sense that you want something else from me."

"I want to take a nap on our giant bed with you."

George shuts the fridge a little too hard.

"C'mon," Clay says. "Don't you want to get into bed with me?"

"You're such an idiot."

Clay laughs, delighted because he knows as well as George does that that means yes.

Later, when they're both lying in bed next to each other, inspecting their popcorn ceiling:

"Are we completely sure about the asbestos...?"

"What? Yeah, we are," Clay says through a yawn. He's less than a foot away from George, close enough that they both fall together slightly. Clay's hair tickles him through the thin fabric of his shirt. "Okay, maybe. Depends on how much a test kit costs."

So, yeah. The house is pretty shit, and they definitely need to get an asbestos test kit, no matter the cost. Just in case. But it's a bearable kind of shit, because it's offset by all these things that George never really considered he'd ever want or really even have in his life. The knowledge that he knows exactly who he is, what he wants, even if he isn't quite there yet. Somebody to spend his time with, somebody who gets along with him like a house on fire (even if it isn't entirely a permanent arrangement, but as George watches Clay drift off into sleep he decides that that's a problem for another day). Ultimately, George finds that he doesn't really mind much of this, because he's doing it with Clay.

It's George and Clay, the way it has been for longer than it hasn't been by now. It's Clay being on call with George as George opens his acceptance from an art school near Jacksonville. Clay had been more excited than he had, yelling about how that was only a twenty-minute drive from where he lived with his parents.

It's George, stepping off a plane from Brighton and into the arms of an online friend that he'd Facetimed all of three times before making the decision to fly halfway across the world. He'd left his whole family behind, and good riddance, but where he would've gone if Clay hadn't been there waiting on the other end, George doesn't know.

It's George screaming his head off in the passenger seat when Clay, laughing like a maniac, tries to drift in his brand-new (secondhand) Subaru. It's Clay accidentally reading through the rejections from various job applications on George's G-mail after graduation and suggesting, with an uncharacteristic amount of tact, you know, my new apartment is a little too big for just me. It's George letting Clay cling onto him in the first few moments of shock after his dad calls with the news about his grandma, and the strange house that she's unequivocally left to him, to do as he pleased with. It's Clay choosing to share it with George without a second thought.

George and Clay. Clay and George.

George mouths their names to the background noise of Clay's soft snoring until they muddle into nonsense in his brain. Outside, the twilight dims into darkness.

For a while, nothing much changes. Clay drives to work in the mornings, George sits around and draws stuff for people on Twitter and Facebook marketplace. On the weekends, or on the relatively rare days that Clay calls in sick, they yank out the rest of the dead stuff in both yards. And apparently it's legal and common practice to burn trash in this part of Florida, but George just barely stops Clay from holding a lighter to the pile of dead leaves by reminding him what a spectacularly bad idea it would be to start a fire outside during the dry season, right in front of a mostly-wooden porch. Nick comes over again and doesn't help at all, but he christens the sapling--an elm, apparently, which carries exactly zero meaning for George--but anyway, he christens it Sapnap, some nonsense name that George doesn't even bother to ask about.

"I think we should just let it grow out again," Clay says as they look proudly on at the soil, dark and rich-looking without the junk on top. In the corner, Sapnap stands tall, already looking much healthier. "Just to piss off the neighborhood committee."

"Would they really care that much about a lawn?"

Both Clay and Nick snort. "You'd be surprised," Clay says, nudging George lightly. George doesn't get it.

So they let the garden grow out. Once it gets a little more humid, which is not a tall task to ask from the Florida climate, George is delighted to see little green shoots peeking through the loose earth.

They drive to Trader's Joe over the weekend for groceries, giggle over the exotic hipster superfoods, and then Clay goes and buys like a pint of chia seeds anyway, like that doesn't completely ruin the joke.

("Fine, then. No chia seeds for you," Clay pouts, then hands his card to the cashier.

"I didn't say that, asshole. I want chia. Also, I'm paying." George replaces Clay's card with his own, faster than he can hand it over.)

Then they stop at a Dave and Buster's on the way home and George loses horribly to Clay and his freakishly good hand-eye coordination. As penance, he has to drive them home with a mouthful of raw chia seeds. He picks that shit out of his teeth for a week after that.

One day, George comes home after running some errands and almost has a heart attack after finding the front door open and the screen door just barely latched, and then he finds himself on the verge of death again almost immediately after finding Clay lying on his stomach next to the coffee table, nose-to-nose with a scrawny brown tabby that ignores him in favor of the bowl of food it's currently making its way through.

Clay doesn't even have the decency to look sheepish or to explain himself. The cat looks up and meows, voice high and frail and absolutely heart-melting.

So, they have a cat now. They call her Patches, they feed her and bathe her and take her to the vet; in return, she scratches up the bathroom curtain and refuses to be coaxed out from under the couch. But also, she consents to be carried around like a baby and she scares off the pests that they can't afford to call an exterminator for, so it all evens out. George gets used to drawing and eating and watching TV with a cat lying belly-up in his lap.

At night, they change and they brush their teeth, and they get into their one shared bed and chat shit for a little bit until one of them starts drifting off, and after a while all the comments and the awkward jokes that Clay makes all sort of...trail off. Then it feels like the most normal thing in the

world to sleep in the same bed as his best friend.

Sometimes they'll wake up to Patches sleeping on one of their faces.

(Sometimes George will go to the bathroom in the middle of the night and when he gets back Clay will reach out blindly for him. They've been drifting closer and closer in the middle of the night, lately, and it's always Clay who bridges the gap. George gets used to Clay's hands on the hem of his shirt, or his nose pressed against George's neck. For all he knows, Clay isn't even aware that he does this. George is afraid to tell him about it, for fear that he'll stop.)

"I'm about to say something stupid," George warns as Clay carefully makes his way out the window.

"Wait 'til I'm not in imminent danger of dying, please," Clay says. George waits for Clay to settle down next to him on one of their old air mattresses out on the flat part of the roof, unpacking their makeshift picnic basket as Clay gets comfortable.

"Aw, you didn't bring cups or anything?" George pulls out the bottle of Moët they'd pocketed at his birthday dinner earlier that night, hosted by one of their more financially successful mutual friends.

"Let's just share the bottle," Clay says.

George shrugs, then carefully pulls the cork out, which comes loose all at once with a pop. It lands somewhere in their neighbor's yard. They look at each other, wide-eyed, and then George shrugs again, brings the champagne bottle to his lips. It's still crisp and annoyingly fresh, but it tastes bougie, so it's perfect. He coughs and passes it to Clay, who takes a swig as well.

"What was it you were gonna say? Something stupid?"

"Oh, yeah. You can't laugh, though."

"What? Well, no promises."

"Okay, whatever, asshole." George turns the thought over in his head, smoothing the wrinkled edge of the mattress. Maybe it's the alcohol. Maybe it's the moon, huge and bright and pale, the stars like freckles on a strange face. Maybe it's the knowledge that another year of his life has gone by with Clay firmly in the center of it. "I just think I might be in the best possible timeline. For me, that is."

Clay stays quiet, so he babbles to fill the silence. "It's just when I think about where else I could have ended up, I don't think I would be half as content as I am here."

When George finally musters up the courage to glance at Clay, he's already looking right back, pale eyes nearly glowing in the moonlight. His smile presses up the corners of his eyes the way that they usually never do. There's something about it that makes George's chest twinge wistfully.

"Even if you hate the house?" Clay asks, slinging an arm over George's shoulder. It's pleasantly warm, not too hot, especially in the dead of night. The damp Florida air hangs still, unmoored, but George and Clay are anchored by each other.

"I don't hate the house, I just think it's shit. I think it's shit and I still want to live here. If I didn't, then, you know, I'd be back in Brighton, probably. Or I would have made it to Florida and I'd be

living in...whatever the Florida version of public housing is. The house is kind of a problem, but it's also kind of worth it." George smiles to himself. "I'm happy to be here. I don't think I say that enough."

"I'm happy to be here too," Clay says quietly. Then he sits up straighter. "Oh, wait—"

He drops his arm and stands up carefully, then turns to George. "Wait here."

Then Clay slips back in through the window with George watching him, bewildered. After a moment, he emerges again, with something thin and flat tucked in the front of his hoodie. It slides precariously, threatening to slip out as Clay picks his way over to the mattress.

"Here," he says, lifting the hem of his hoodie and letting the package fall into George's lap. "Happy birthday!"

George turns the package, painstakingly wrapped in expensive-looking paper. "But you already got me a gift, what's this?"

Clay snorts. "I got you a Steam gift card. You really thought that was it?"

"Maybe." He tears through the wrapping paper as Clay settles in on his right again, leaning against his side in a line of heat. The wrapping paper comes off, and George bursts into laughter.

In his hands is an ornate vintage-looking photo frame, hefty in a way that betrays its expense, comedically dissonant with a picture of him and Clay at eighteen and seventeen, young and hopeful and awkward in a strangely foreign way. They're standing about a foot apart from each other, stiff and posed for the picture smack-dab in the middle of the arrivals queue at Jacksonville International.

"Oh my god," He's smiling so hard that his cheeks hurt. "How did you even find this? I thought you said that the SD card was corrupted?"

"It was. This is the result of a whole bunch of phone calls with my mom and like five trips to Best Buy."

"I can't believe you even remembered this picture," George says wonderingly.

"I don't think I could forget anything about that day, even if I wanted to."

George rolls his eyes and hopes that it's too dim for Clay to see the way his face feels like it's burning. The truth is that George remembers this just as well as Clay probably does. The first time he'd set foot in Florida—the anxiety, the exhaustion, of stepping out of the terminal and into the endless crush of people. It had hit him, then, that he was on his own, that he'd packed his bags and left everything behind rather unceremoniously. Just for a moment, it felt like a mistake.

Then Clay had come barreling out of the crowd and—George remembers this well—stopped in front of him like he wasn't sure what he was allowed to do.

"Who was it that took the picture again?"

"My mom. With that dinky little digital Nikon camera," Clay says with zero pause. He stretches his neck over, props his sharp chin in the crook of George's neck. "We look so awkward, don't we?"

"I know, right? Look at my hair." He points at the too-short buzz on the sides of his head, the tuft of hair curling over his forehead. "Why did I do that? I look like a jellybean."

“At least you didn’t have a weird little puberty mustache,” Clay mourns. It makes George giggle, which sets Clay off as well, the soft puff of his breath ghosting over George’s ear.

So they had taken the picture, at Clay’s mom’s behest, although George could tell that Clay wasn’t quite so successful at pretending like he didn’t want the photo just as badly. And there it was, immortalized in shiny film. The two of them, George and Clay, faces to the camera but bodies curved toward each other, neither one quite so sure how excited they could outwardly be.

Then Clay had surprised him for the second time within the first five minutes they had ever met by lunging at him and pulling him into a hug.

There is no photograph of that moment. But then again, maybe there doesn’t need to be. It’s not the sort of thing that George thinks he would ever need a reminder of.

“You know, that day, I didn’t think you were real,” Clay says softly. “Or that you were really in Florida. Just for like, a moment, though.”

He sits up straighter, although they still slouch against each other.

“Now,” Clay says, “Now, I get to remind myself every day that you exist, right here. With me.”

It’s a good time, even if they have to do it all with a popcorn ceiling and garish wallpaper and the bathroom curtain and maybe-asbestos. Because all that matters is that it’s them.

George and Clay.

Clay and George.

George and Clay and Clay and—

George and Clay have a tiny problem.

It starts when George is in Trader Joe’s again, alone this time because it’s three o’clock on a weekday. He has an embarrassingly tall stack of organic whatever snacks from the sale rack, because he really needs to eat healthier, and a box of their dark chocolate peanut butter cups, because he loves himself. So George isn’t exactly looking where he’s going, more focused on balancing everything on his way back to his trolley, which is why he misses somebody walking straight into him. Everything goes flying.

“Oh, what the hell, I’m so sorry,” George says automatically. The other guy is already bent over, gathering George’s stuff for him.

“Oh no, you don’t have anything to apologize for,” the man says. “That was all me, I should’ve been paying attention.” The guy straightens up and he towers over George. Well, he isn’t exactly complaining about that right this instant.

The guy’s built like a tree, all tall and broad and flexing forearms. His smile crinkles his face endearingly as he hands an armful of things to George, who is reminded of the fact that he hasn’t been on a date in a hot minute.

“I swear to god I’m not this much of a klutz. I’m actually a dance teacher, so--oh, I don’t know why I mentioned that. That doesn’t matter.” He laughs and George watches, fascinated, as his neck turns red. He tries to scratch the back of his neck and just narrowly catches George’s peanut butter cups

from falling again. "Whoops. But yeah, sorry." He laughs again. Cute. George finds himself smiling as well.

"It's fine. Just do better next time."

"Next time?" One of the guy's eyebrows raises.

"Is that not where this is going?"

"Oh, well, I don't know." The guy seems adorably lost for a second, then he offers his hand, still holding the other half of George's snacks. "I'm Anthony."

"George." He takes Anthony's hand and they shake awkwardly.

"George," Anthony says, like he's testing out the sound. "Do you want help with these?"

After they finish their shopping they go to a trendy little café nearby. Anthony is nice, and he flusters even easier than George. He has a bit of a fascination with George's accent. George finds it incredibly funny, and he makes a point to tell him so.

Anthony blushes again. "I've never been out of the country, you know? Barely been out of Florida."

"Aw," George says without thinking. "I'm not making fun of you, I swear. You're cute, that's all."

"Thanks. You are too, I guess."

"Oh, thanks, I guess."

Anthony groans. "You know what I mean."

It goes well. They exchange numbers by the end of it, and Anthony drives away in a cherry red pickup truck, waving to George as he pulls out of the parking lot.

"You sure took your time," Clay says rather impetuously. He's lying on the couch, Patches snoozing on his chest. "I thought you said you'd be back by six?"

"Yeah, sorry. I got waylaid." George sets down the shopping on the kitchen counter and takes out the quinoa chips.

"Were the superfoods just that enchanting?"

George snorts. "Sure. No, I, um," he's not sure why he's nervous, "I met somebody."

"Wow," Clay shakes his head. "Only you would get a date at Trader Joe's. How did it happen, then? You were buying celery, she was buying rosé?"

"He was actually pretty nice. Super-tall too, so that's a plus." George tosses the quinoa chips over to the couch and pulls his phone out of his pocket, checking his inbox. "Budge over."

Clay doesn't move. "Hey, budge over."

He looks over, and Clay's staring at George like he's never seen him before. He sits up and Patches sprawls onto his lap, hissing indignantly.

"What?" George asks, suddenly self-conscious.

"Nothing, I just--'he'?" Clay looks kind of like he's been slapped. It's strange to see him this ruffled.

"Wait, what's the problem here? You know I like guys, Clay."

"Do I?" Clay sounds incredibly distressed.

"I--" George frowns. "Why do you think I wanted to get out of Brighton so badly?"

"I thought your parents didn't want you to go to art school."

"Well, yeah. Because...gay," George says. "Have we really not talked about this before?"

"No," Clay says. He says it like a question, and he sounds strangely deflated. It really hits George then that they haven't discussed this, and *apparently* he's been taking it for granted that Clay's been so nice about it.

"If this is going to be a problem," George starts carefully.

"What? No." Clay shakes his head frantically. "No, not a problem, not a problem at all. Of course it isn't a problem. Just--let me get over myself."

The silence is awkward between them. George hates it. They don't do awkward silences, and usually, George would pat Clay's shin or something, but now it feels like there's a line that Clay would balk at if he crossed it. Clay is way too smart to not have also realized the gap between them.

In the end, the silence is broken by Patches, who tries to curl up in the space between George's legs. She is largely unsuccessful, but she looks just about cute enough as she tries that George coos and scoops her up like the big furry baby that she is.

George informs her of this, and Clay makes a strangled sort of noise behind them before he starts shoving chips in his mouth. Rather abruptly, he stands up, mouth still full of quinoa chips, and rushes up the stairs.

"Where are you going?" George asks. Clay mumbles something indistinct and keeps going upstairs.

After a moment of deliberation, George doesn't follow him, for a whole litany of reasons. The first because he knows when to push Clay and when to yield. And by now, he's learned the hard way that people need time with this kind of thing, as much as it made his blood boil.

(Also, it's a little because of the way that he feels just as unsteady—even if he did barge in after Clay, George doesn't know what he'd even do.)

Here's the thing.

Clay might be the most important part of George's sorry little life. Scratch that, he *is*. He is the most important part of George's sorry little life. He can think of nobody that he spends more time with, that his existence is more entangled in. Shit, they basically own a house together, even if the

house is question is strange and bad and kind of a problem. It's still a house. And he knows, he knows, that Nick laughs at them for a reason, but. See above. George wouldn't trade this for the world. He'd take any day forgetting to skip over the trick step on the porch and almost knocking half his teeth out over living in a perfectly functioning place on his own, simply because Clay is right there to laugh at him when it happens.

So George knows that this kind of sucks. But he also knows that he'd rather have this than to have nothing at all from Clay. Whatever the hell it is they have here, whatever it is that makes Nick mime vomiting every two seconds, George doesn't want to lose that. This is something that he refuses to fuck up. It's the sense of fragile harmony that George notices every once in a while, has noticed for years now. It's something that George hopes like hell that Clay understands as well, that the two of them are so perfectly central to his existence. He can't fuck them up.

That night, later than he usually would, George slips into the other side of a king bed that feels huger and lonelier than it's ever felt. He spends some time staring up at the ceiling. The night sky is just bright enough that it looks speckled with spots of dark, like the shell of a quail egg.

"Hey," Clay whispers, scaring George out of his contemplation. His hand comes up from under the covers and tugs on George's sleeve.

"Hi," George mutters.

"Sorry," Clay says, his voice raspy with sleep. "I hope you know that I wasn't trying to make you feel...bad. It doesn't change anything, I promise. I don't know. I had a hard day at work, is all. And maybe I felt like an idiot for not knowing about this sooner."

"You are an idiot." Clay pinches him half-heartedly and then wraps his hand lightly over George's wrist. "But it's fine. We're good now, yeah?"

Clay smiles, and it might just be the darkness, it might just be that half of his face is smushed into a pillow, but it looks strange and a little unformed. "Yeah. Thanks, man."

They are decidedly not good. The tiny problem grows. Something is off with Clay--not world-endingly wrong, just incongruous enough that George isn't quite sure what to make of it.

Exhibit A: Clay comes rushing in just moments after George hears the Subaru pulling up to the curb, yelling and just generally being loud. He bounds up to George with a smile, and shouts, right in his face, "I got promoted! Finally!"

And then George is getting an armful of Clay, and they're jumping around together like idiots. Par for the course, so far.

But only moments later Clay is pulling away from George like he's been burned, although the smile on his face stays in place and he keeps talking about his day. Only now, his face is turned away from George as he fast-walks into the kitchen. And George is sitting there, wondering if he'd maybe just imagined the darkening of the backs of Clay's ears.

Exhibit B: George, tending to a fast-growing Sapnap during a particularly cloudy Saturday. Clay's come out of the house at some point, and he's eating a bowl of cereal as he watches George from the porch, lazy bastard.

Without thinking, George looks up, waves, and yells to Clay, "He's gotten so long!"

Clay freezes, a grin begins to flicker on his face, and George braces himself for the predictable joke--

But then Clay ducks his head and goes back to eating his cereal.

And George could normally attribute all of this to "uncomfortable straight person" but George knows better than to do that. Mainly because Clay keeps *looking at him*. This is something entirely new. It's something that George doesn't know how to read when it comes from Clay.

Exhibit C: George and Clay, marathoning Silicon Valley one night. It's good, witty and sardonic in just the way that George loves, and maybe he's a little bit tipsy. It means that he's giggling at nearly every line, even as he tries to suppress his laughter because he doesn't want to annoy Clay.

Who has not stopped glancing over at him like he's seeing something totally foreign each time.

Some joke sets George off again, and then he keeps thinking about it and he keeps laughing. Clay, for his part, is outright staring now, wide-eyed and maybe a little devastated. When he catches George staring back, still laughing, he looks down, laughs a little as well. George realizes that his eyes are trained on where their hands are brushing against each other.

All this to say that there is *something* there. Something indefinable. Something more difficult to wave away, or to confront head-on, than latent homophobia. George can handle that just fine but there are parts of whatever the hell is happening here that he is afraid of. So he doesn't say anything, he lets Clay duck out of hugs, he watches his words a little more, he doesn't call Clay out on his staring. Things stay mostly the same, even if George is just that slight bit more aware of himself when they're spending time together.

Because the thing is, George thinks that he has an idea as to what that something might be, or at least, he knows what he hopes it is. It's one of those things that he's never said out loud, but then in many ways, this has never been something that he's ever had to vocalize. He feels it when he dozes off in the kitchen only to wake up to Clay, shirt rumpled, singing under his breath as he makes a grilled cheese. The warmth in his chest at the sight.

(Clay, turning around and seeing him awake, "Hey, sleepy cat.")

Early in the morning, on the increasingly frequent occasion that they wake up wrapped up in each other on the same side of the bed. George remembers waking up to find his head on Clay's chest, feeling comfortably and completely content.

(They've always had the kind of friendship where practically nothing was off the table. So as Clay wakes up, George stays still and keeps his face turned away. Maybe this way Clay'll be too embarrassed to rib him too hard about it later in the day.

But all Clay does is sigh, and then George feels the soft scrape of Clay's blunt fingernails in his hair.

It's nice because they keep the AC far too low as they sleep. Clay burns hot as a furnace, so with his nose pressed against Clay's sternum and their calves intertwined, it lulls him back into sleep before he can consider what it might have meant.)

Sitting on the roof of the house during a brownout right on the cusp of hurricane season. The two of them marveling at the stars, so miraculously visible for once. They stay out long enough to get soaked by the sudden downpour, but neither of them care.

George tucks these sweet little moments deep inside his chest, like a butterfly collector of some sort. There isn't much that he can do with these other than to contemplate them once in a while when he can admit to himself that maybe he does long for a little more. That he'd like for there to be a little more between them.

But this much he knows--he *can't* fuck them up.

nothing but you

Chapter Summary

stick to the path // i can't stick to the path // 'cause i think about--

Chapter Notes

[rolls in late with a smoothie] ...hi.

look i KNOW i'm weeks late, but let's focus on the positive here--at least i finally got this finished. also this chapter is sooo much longer than the first one lol, just to make up for it (totally not because it got away from me or anything).

i'm actually so sorry about the delay, school and Life are generally kicking my ass, but writing this has been a really nice respite. thank you so much for all the comments and kudos on the first chapter! this is the first dnf fic i've ever written (and also the longest thing i've written in a while) and i was so pleasantly surprised by the good reception.

as always, come talk to me on [tumblr](#)! enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George leans back, throwing his hands up. "Of course you know how to surf."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Anthony asks, grinning.

"You're a Floridian dancer, is what I mean. I don't know what else I expected."

Their names are called, and Anthony stands up before George can say anything and grabs their two drinks.

"I mean, don't you? Surf, that is."

"What do you think?"

Anthony laughs. "I don't know."

"No, I don't. Brighton had beaches, but I've never been an athlete."

"You've lived here for how long? Eight years? It's practically a sin at this point that you don't know how to surf by now."

"Clay doesn't—I mean, I've never really had cause to learn."

"I could teach you--we could make a day of it."

George thinks that he likes the idea of going to the beach with Anthony. "Maybe on the fifth date

or so. It's a little early for me to be making a fool of myself in front of you just yet."

Anthony insists on driving him back home, because he's just that polite. George protests, but doesn't put up that much of a fight when Anthony opens the passenger door to the cab of the truck with a teasing flourish.

"It's just that one over there," George motions down to the left side of the road.

"Oh," Anthony says. He pulls up to the curb and squints at the garish paint in the sun. "It's certainly--"

"Tacky? Dilapidated? Straight out of the 70s, and not in a good way?"

Anthony laughs. "I was going to say it was retro."

"Sure you were. Um," George looks down, smiles. "I had a nice time--"

"Let me walk you up," Anthony says abruptly. He unbuckles his seatbelt and gets out of the truck, then darts around to open the door for George again.

"And they say chivalry is dead," George says. "But yeah, retro is certainly a word for it. I don't actually mind it, though. It's cheap and I own the place with my roommate, plus it's close to his work."

"Your roommate? Is that him up there?" Anthony points at the porch, and George glances over to see Nick sitting on the porch step, sipping contemplatively on a Capri-Sun that he has definitely stolen from their fridge. He notices George then and waves wildly, like he thinks George can't see him.

"Yes, hi," George calls as they make their way up. He says to Anthony, "That is an intruder."

"Good to see you too, dear friend," Nick says. He eyes Anthony with considerably less congeniality. "Who's the boy?"

"Oh, sorry. This is Anthony. Anthony, this is Nick."

Nick doesn't make a move to stand up, but switches his juice pouch to his left hand and holds out his right to Anthony, who towers over him as they shake.

"Good to meet you, man," Anthony says.

Nick says nothing, just watches the two of them curiously, like he's considering a particularly tricky sudoku card.

"Uh, Nick," George says pointedly.

"Oh, right," Nick says. "I'll just...leave you to it then."

He turns around and heads inside, closing first the screen door and then the front door excruciatingly slowly.

George sighs. "Sorry. He's an idiot and we have a slightly belligerent relationship."

Anthony just looks amused. "No worries. I mean, I had a good time with you today, interruptions

aside."

George giggles. "Me too."

He fidgets with his car keys, then shoves his hands into the pockets of his shorts. George notices the tips of his ears darkening, and he realizes with a rush that Anthony is leaning in awkwardly. So he makes a decision.

He reaches up on his tiptoes and kisses Anthony on the cheek.

(It's not something George particularly wants to think about, why he'd gone for Anthony's cheek, even after their meet-cute and a perfectly pleasant date. The reason has something to do with socked feet sticking out over the end of the couch, an air mattress on the rooftop, the ornately-framed photo that now sits on the mantelpiece. A home—and a heart—that is already full.)

When he pulls back, Anthony looks bewildered, maybe a little disappointed, but still flushed.

Anthony smiles and fishes his keys out of his pocket. "I'll see you next time then?"

"Definitely." George waves goodbye as Anthony heads to his pick-up.

As it leaves, he turns around and nearly jumps out of his skin when he finds himself face-to-face with Nick.

"Chill," Nick says easily. "Now, what was that?"

"Um, that was a date. I know that it's a bit of an unfamiliar concept to you."

"I've gone on dates before," Nick protests hotly, which doesn't help his case. He follows George inside as he grabs the last Capri-Sun from the fridge. "But it's been a while since I saw you on one. In fact, I don't think I've *ever* seen you on a date."

"That sounds like a you problem." George shrugs, like *what can you do?* "I really like Anthony. He's sweet."

"Isn't there, you know..." Nick makes a vague, sweeping motion around the house. "Isn't all this an issue?"

George stares, uncomprehending.

"Like, you and Clay."

"What does Clay have to do with any of this?"

"Just think about it. For like, a second. Use that big brain."

So he does. "I mean I guess it's important to me that Clay gets along with him? But that goes for you as well."

"Very kind of you to say, but that isn't what I meant."

"What do you mean, then?"

"Okay, let me put it this way. Take a seat." He gestures at the couch, and George can do nothing but sit and listen. Nick ponders for a second, then crumples up his empty juice pouch. "Have you ever considered that you and Clay are...really close?"

Something falls in the pit of George's stomach. "Well, we've been friends for...more than a decade now. Of course we're close. Wouldn't it be weirder if we weren't?"

"Yeah, but I've been friends with Clay for *way* longer than you, and I would rather sleep in your backyard than be caught in bed with him."

"Why are you still so caught up on that?" George scowls. "I'm sick of—"

"That's not my point, George, I just mean," Nick sighs. "Why do you guys even sleep in the same bed? I'm seriously asking you. Like actually, why?"

"Because there's only one bedroom? Duh. What else would we do?"

"Are you insane? You live in a house. With multiple floors and multiple rooms. Like, you have an office upstairs, and I don't think anybody's set foot in there since you moved in. So why not just move in there?"

George casts his memory back. "We bought our mattress on a huge discount. It didn't seem right to waste money on two beds when one worked just fine."

"And it never crossed your mind that you, a grown adult, might not want to sleep in the same bed with some guy?"

"Well, it's not just 'some guy'. It's Clay. So it's different."

Nick throws his hands up. "Unbelievable. You know, Clay said the exact same thing when I asked him about this."

"What are you trying to say? That we're, like," George gestures vaguely, although he can feel his cheeks heating at the implication. "That we're banging, or something?"

"I don't know! Maybe!" Nick gets up and walks a circle around the living room. George shakes his head, surreptitiously presses the back of his hand to his cheek. It comes away too warm.

"Clay didn't even know I was gay until a few weeks ago. It's so far out of his, like, realm of consciousness that I don't know how he'd feel about you implying that." George looks down at his Capri-Sun, squeezes it between his fingers. It glistens with condensation. "So, no. Sorry to disappoint, but it's not that deep."

As he says that, something in his head asks him to look back at all the little moments he has stowed away inside of him. The sharp line of Clay's jaw when he has his head tilted back on the arm of the sofa, the sprawl of his long legs. In the mornings, his open work shirt, threadbare tank top underneath. The way he sometimes smiles at George like the two of them are privy to a secret that nobody else in the world will ever get to know. In some ways, they are.

(But he can't fuck this up. He can't let it go to shit, because if he does that then he knows that everything else will eventually follow. This much he knows, whatever his feelings are.)

The front door shuts. "What's not that deep?"

"Oh, hi, Clay!" Nick says, switching effortlessly to a false veneer of pleasantry.

"Hey," Clay says. He drops his bag and walks over to the couch, unthinkingly rests his arm over George's shoulders. The weight is altogether stifling yet comfortingly familiar. "I didn't know you were stopping by, Nick."

"I didn't either," George clarifies. Clay snorts, scratches his fingers lightly over the nape of George's neck, where the hair's grown out a little too long as of late. It makes him shiver, and he wonders if Clay can feel the goosebumps that raise back there.

Nick glares at him. Then, out of what George assumes is sheer pettiness, he says, "We were just talking about George's *date*."

George flips him off discreetly.

Clay's hand stills, then lifts from George's shoulders. He crosses his arms across his chest. George isn't quite daring enough to see what face he's making.

"You were?" He asks, sounding oddly subdued.

"Yeah. He threatened to take me surfing," George jokes. He already misses the weight of his arm.

Clay doesn't say anything for a second that feels like ten whole minutes. Then, he says, rather absently, "I don't like surfing."

"Then it's a good thing that I'm the one that's been invited," George jokes, but nobody laughs.

"I mean, you're not much of an athlete," Clay says.

Maybe it's the brusque way that Clay says it that makes George stop short.

"Yeah, I know. I said so to him."

Maybe it's just because he can tell that, yet again, that he's struck a nerve, but he isn't quite sure what he's done.

"Okay, good," Clay says, then lets the silence hang in the air. He stands up. "I'm gonna get a Capri-Sun."

"George took the last one," Nick calls as Clay makes his way over to the kitchen.

"Oh. Whatever then." He turns back around and heads upstairs. "I'll just go and shower."

"You can have mine, if you really want," George says, confused. Clay doesn't reply, but the sound of the bedroom door shutting is loud and clear, yet utterly unhelpful.

"Clay's been weird, lately," George says to Nick by way of explanation.

"I'll say." Nick gets up from his perch on the coffee table, which creaks ominously as his weight lifts. "Well, I won't keep you for any longer."

"Wait—why did you even stop by if you were immediately going to leave?"

Nick shrugs.

"Just to bother me?" George asks. "Great."

"I came to open your third eye," Nick says cryptically. "In two months or so, let me know if it worked."

"What?"

“You heard me. Oh, wait,” he points at George. “I also came to remind you that my birthday is in like six weeks, so you have plenty of time to get me a good present.”

“Thanks,” George says bitterly.

“Expect a hastily written text with a venue and a time within this month. And, um, good luck with Anthony!” Nick calls on his way out of the house.

George, sitting alone at the couch, scoffs to himself.

The house seems a little too cavernous now that Nick’s gone and Clay’s being strange and silent upstairs. He might as well start dinner.

He likes Anthony, he really does. Anthony is uncomplicated and kind and very sweet. The stakes are lower with Anthony, who is practically a stranger, who actually likes him back.

But at times, like right now, as George watches the pasta boil, well...

It’s easy to imagine taking that extra step with Clay. Now that he’s paying attention, it feels like every other moment they spend together is perfect for that. He thinks about it again: driving home after one of Clay’s BS work events, hands knocking against each other on the center console during red lights. Early in the morning as they eat cornflakes across from each other, Clay’s hair frizzy and floppy. Late at night, whispering to each other, it would be so easy to turn and close the gap—

“Hey.” Clay’s standing in the doorway in a tank top and sweatpants, hair wet and a little towel around his neck.

George adds some more salt to the water. “Back so soon?”

“Hah,” Clay laughs, but not like he actually finds it funny. “Yeah. I’m here now, anyway. Sorry. Did Nick leave?”

“Yeah, about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Okay. What are you making?”

“Just pasta. I’m not even sure if we have sauce. It might just be this and thousand island dressing for dinner.”

“Ooh, yum yum.” Clay pads over and unthinkingly hangs the damp towel over George’s left shoulder. “Move a bit. I think we still have a can of alfredo up here.”

“Careful,” George says, but evidently not soon enough to stop Clay from ramming his head into the corner of the cabinet.

“Ow,” he says, backing away from the stovetop.

“Shit. You okay?” George puts the spoon down and turns to Clay.

“Ow,” Clay says again, grimacing. He has a hand pressed against where he’s hit his head. “Fuck. This house sucks.”

“I know, right? I’ve been telling you this for ages.” George guides Clay so that he’s propped up

against a less hazardous area of the countertop. He tugs gently at Clay's wrist. "Come on, let me have a look."

Hesitantly, Clay lets his hand fall into his lap. George sucks in a sympathetic breath, pushing away the hair that falls over Clay's left temple. The bump is just at the edge of his hairline and it's already looking slightly raw. There's a little red scratch there, a cut that isn't deep enough to start bleeding, but that'll eventually scab dark. He wets Clay's towel a little and presses it against his head.

"That *hurts*," he protests, flinching away and nearly braining himself again in the process.

"Don't be a baby."

"Don't tell me what to do!"

"Clay! Stop squirming!"

Clay ignores him and swats out wildly. "Just because you're too damn short to—"

"*Fine*," George says forcefully. He catches Clay's hand and presses it on the towel. "Do it yourself, then."

"No, wait—"

He makes to let go and go back to the stove when Clay catches his wrist with his other hand. There's something slightly desperate in his eyes.

It's only now that George realizes how close they've been standing this whole time. Ankles slotted together. Clay backed up against the countertop, broad freckled shoulders bare. George's hand threaded in his hair, leaning into his space. Close enough that he can count the separate hairs in Clay's pale lashes, that he can see the faintest shadow of stubble on his upper lip. They're sharing the same air, and in all the years of their friendship that's never been an oddity, except right now it's all George can do to stop himself from fixating on it.

Another picture perfect moment for him to obsess over after the fact. Another instance where they come closer and closer and one or both of them rip apart just before the moment of contact. Except, George is leaning in, and Clay doesn't do anything to stop him. He just watches, green eyes considering, mouth slack and slightly open. Their hands are still intertwined. Then, Clay glances away and his eyes widen.

"George, the pasta—"

George turns around. The pasta is boiling over.

"Shit!" He rushes over and turns the stove off, taking the lid off and fanning the steam away. As the water settles, the pasta is overcooked and swollen.

It's jarring enough that the state of equilibrium they'd found themselves in falls apart. Clay still has his towel pressed to the side of his head, still staring at George with that same plaintiveness in his gaze. *What do you want*, George wants to know, but he's just a little too afraid to ask.

Instead he laughs, a little breathless. "Can't believe I screwed up boiling pasta."

There is a silence where George thinks that Clay is weighing his options. It's only for a split second, but it's enough (and George knows him well enough to know) that Clay is about to make a

very deliberate choice. All George can do is hope that he chooses the one that doesn't—well. You already know.

Clay smiles shakily, straightens from his hunching perch on the kitchen countertop. "Don't be too hard on yourself. That one was a team effort."

Yet again, things return to normal. Mostly.

Okay, things return to about 40% of normal.

George tiptoes around Clay. Afraid of what he might say, if he'll say anything at all about it. He thinks Clay might be doing the same, and he isn't sure if that hurts or if he's just relieved. Clay comes home from work later, spends more time with his colleagues and less time with George. Who, for his part, throws himself into his work, texts more of his college friends. The living room is dimmer and larger without Clay lying there with his things strewn all over the place.

(George sits there at night after eating dinner on his own, with Patches sprawled on his lap.

"This is...it's kind of ruining us. This is fucking us up." He holds Patches up to eye-level and she stares back intently. "Right?"

Patches chirps and squirms out of his grip to go stick her head between the couch cushions.)

There's plenty else to think about, though. Like the fact that George and Clay are actually, maybe, for the first time ever...doing pretty well for themselves.

Clay drives to work on his own, dressed a little better and hair slicked down a little neater. He's pulling in a sizable paycheck now, big enough that they stop being loyal customers at the dollar store. He still comes home looking drained as hell, but George thinks that it's the satisfying bone-deep ache of a job well done, which is infinitely more preferable.

George draws and designs more commissions, argues with some of his clients and builds trusting relationships with others. One of them, some influencer-facing tech place on the West Coast, tentatively mentions a free position for a graphic designer. For the first time in his life, George's skillset is finally translating into good money.

It's kind of a trip to be able to afford luxuries, even if they are few and far between. He buys new headphones, peruses the Best Buy website and hesitantly adds the new Wacom tablet to his cart. And then he just sort of stares at the listing for a while. He notes the surplus in his bank account, thinks about the check he offered to Clay at the start of their time here. Maybe it's something to consider again, as painful as the thought is.

And speaking of Clay, well—

Evidently he's making good use of his money. Most days, George only catches glimpses of him as he wakes up (extricating himself from their tangle of limbs—they still can't seem to stay away from each other), and late at night, as he stumbles in at midnight after another night out with his new work friends (thankfully, always alone). His suit jackets get a little less rumpled, he buys a new briefcase, their fridge starts getting filled with actual perishables.

All this to say that George can see them hurtling towards the end. This is where they stop needing each other, right? This is where their paths diverge.

At any point, Clay could flip the shitty house and sell it for a shit-ton of shitty money. The property value must be incredible here, after all. Or more likely, he could kick George out and then rent this place out to people who aren't total freeloaders. Then George would—well, he'd live somewhere on his own, maybe nearer in the city, maybe even in California like half of everybody else on the planet. It's pathetic how much the thought frightens him—what kind of adult is he? What 27-year-old's never lived on his own before?

Clay could walk away anytime he wanted, and the worst part is that George wouldn't fault him for being pragmatic. George holds him back. He doesn't pay rent, Clay covers all the utilities, they buy food and houseware on Clay's card. They sleep in the same goddamn bed, and the more George thinks about that, the worst he feels about it. The house is shit, sure, but beyond that there are a million problems with the way they live, ones that George doesn't really want to solve, but they're going to have to come up eventually.

So it lives in the back of George's mind—the knowledge that without necessity, everything about George-and-Clay is utterly temporary.

Well, they'd still be friends after it all, they just wouldn't live in the same place, or sleep in the same bed, or eat breakfast across from each other nearly every morning. And maybe George is overreacting, but something about having to lose that closeness with Clay is awful to him.

It's a dry, pleasant evening for once, so George is sitting out on the porch answering his most pressing of emails to the backdrop of some old video game soundtrack. He has a window wide open and their electric fan inside whirring on high, and this is about as close as he thinks he'll get to inner peace.

The Subaru pulls into the driveway. George waves when Clay steps out of the car, pausing the music.

"Hey."

George smiles up in greeting. "Long day?"

"Ugh. Yeah."

He pouts sympathetically. "You wanna talk about it?"

"Maybe later," Clay says, uncertain. His hand flexes by his side. "I need to go pet my sweet baby child first."

He steps in the house and the door shuts behind him. Outside, George stretches, reaches back to angle the fan a little bit better. The sky glows orange as he listens to Clay traipsing around inside, making kissy noises like an idiot.

Times like these, he can convince himself that nothing's changed, and that nothing ever has to change.

He's thinking about going in and getting a drink when the door swings open again and Clay's head peeks out, frowning at George. He asks, "Do you know where Patches is?"

"She's usually in the kitchen this time of the day," George says, gesturing in through the open window. "Is she not—"

Then, he realizes. They must realize in the same moment. The carelessly open window, the lack of a cat— “Oh, shit—”

“Fuck, what the fuck,” Clay mutters as he steps back in the house. George hastily gathers his things and follows him inside.

“Okay, when did you open the window?” Clay asks. He jams his feet back into his shoes roughly and rummages through his bag for the car keys, then seems to think better of it.

“Maybe an hour ago? I’m not quite sure.” Clay groans, and George scrambles. “She’s never done this before, I don’t—”

“We’ll talk about that later,” Clay says sharply.

George’s heart thuds painfully in his chest as he turns away.

“Right,” he says. He puts his things down.

“Okay.” Clay seems to shake himself. “She can’t have gotten far, right?”

“Did you see her on your way back?”

“I don’t *know*, I wasn’t exactly thinking that I’d have to *look*.” Clay’s words come through gritted teeth. And maybe, after over ten years of this George should be a little more used to Clay’s temper tantrums, but everything is especially raw around the edges. So this hurts way more than it really should.

He tamps it down just for the time being. Tucks that away with everything else.

“I’ll go northward, then,” George says, a little weaker than he’d like it to have been. Without waiting for an answer, he walks out of the house.

George trudges back after the sky’s gone dark, after hours going up and down their neighborhood, knocking on people’s doors and desperately showing them the pictures he has of Patches on his phone, all to no avail. He’s dismayed to find Clay standing outside, hunched over with his arms crossed, as empty-handed in his search as George has been.

“Look,” George says, doing his best to stay light. “It’s not the end of the world. We can put up posters tomorrow, and I’ve asked some of the neighbors to keep an eye out for her.”

Clay says nothing as he straightens and walks into the house. George follows. Before it all goes down, some mounting sense of dread says *it’s happening*.

Clay rounds on him. “I just don’t understand how you fucked up this bad, you know? This is a new low for you.”

George is speechless, but only for a second. “I didn’t exactly mean to let her out! Look, Clay, I’m sorry, I really am.”

“Oh, you are? You didn’t *mean* to? That doesn’t change anything.” Clay’s fists ball at his side, then he starts pacing.

“Okay, listen—” George says, keeping his voice even.

“You know, you’re so fucking self-centered.”

“What?”

“Clearly you can’t spare one thought to think about the consequences of your actions—”

“I just wanted to turn the fan on—!”

“—and what about me?”

“What *about* you?”

“We never said that—I didn’t know that you would—” Clay cuts himself off with a yell. “Not once have you ever thought about how I would feel about everything, with you and your dating and—”

“What does me dating have to do with any of this?” George asks incredulously. Then, it shudders all the way through him like ice down the back of his shirt. Clearly, they do have a problem.

“I wasn’t aware we were doing that,” Clay says, slightly strangled.

George feels his eyebrows go all the way back on his hairline, then they furrow back down as he glares at Clay. He speaks past the lump in his throat, the voice in his head that’s just a chorus of *you’re fucking this up you’re fucking this up*.

“Then you do now, don’t worry. You can date whoever the fuck you’d like, Clay, why should I care?” For a second, Clay’s face shifts into something that looks like hurt. “You have a lot of nerve calling me self-centered.”

“Oh, do I?”

“You’ve only just pulled your head far enough out of your ass to find out that I’m gay!”

“My god, this again?” Clay groans and stalks away from George, who follows.

“Yes, again! Even *Nick* knows. You don’t get to sulk about it, or run away from me whenever I mention it.”

“I didn’t *know*!” Clay says wildly.

“Well, that’s just the issue, isn’t it?”

“No, I mean—not because of—” Clay breaks off into a sigh and George watches him cover his face with his hands. “—not because of any of that. It’s just because, well. Don’t laugh.”

“I’ll try to contain my amusement,” George grinds out, still fuming.

It’s like all the fight leaves Clay in one breath. He turns to George and he looks pained, slightly anguished. For a moment, George sees every version of Clay he’s ever known. A faceless voice over a Skype call. A callous kid, just out of high school. His best friend throughout it all. Maybe he really has been taking it for granted that Clay would always be there.

Clay sighs again. “It was one of those things that I could never let myself consider. Because if it turned out that it wasn’t true, or that I had just imagined it, then—”

He stops short. Deathly quiet, he asks, “Do you hear that?”

Without thinking twice, George listens. (Of course he does.)

From under the couch, Patches meows a high and wavery greeting.

“George? Where did you go?” Anthony ribs gently.

George blinks, then smiles sheepishly. Coasting down the highway like this in the pick-up, with both windows open for the evening cool, he feels about ten feet tall, but still hemmed in by the rushing wind on either side.

“Sorry. Just solving world peace.” George shrugs. Anthony laughs and faces the road again, so he counts that as a win. He goes back to saying at nothing, staring at nothing.

He’s fucking them up. He’s doing the one thing that he wasn’t supposed to do.

George’s eyes burn and he tells himself it’s the wind in his eyes.

“Seriously, are you good?” Anthony asks.

Anthony had driven them to a restaurant that one of them had wanted to try—George struggles to remember who. They’d made plans only about a week ago, but that felt like a lifetime ago now, what with—

Anthony is still frowning at him, concerned.

George smiles, although it feels like a grimace. “Long day. Long week, actually. That’s all.”

“Don’t lie,” Anthony says cordially, if not a little shortly.

George pauses, then slackens in his chair. “You’re right. I don’t know how to explain, though.”

“I’m here to listen if you need.”

Anthony’s watching him with a remarkable amount of patience and compassion, so George musters up the nerve to say, “What would you do if like...you thought that you were drifting away from somebody? And you didn’t know how to fix it?”

Anthony thinks for a moment, swirls his drink around as he does. “I don’t know. The way I see it, if you’re drifting apart, it’s happening for a reason.”

George’s eyes prickle with heat again. He blinks down into his lap, feeling foolish.

Anthony continues, “I think it’s only natural for things to change, and maybe drifting apart isn’t a bad thing.”

Before he can do anything about it, the tears start falling. George brings a hand up to wipe them away and it makes Anthony stop in his tracks.

“Oh, oh no,” Anthony says. “I’m so sorry. That was the wrong thing to say, huh?”

George says nothing, still focused on pressing the worst of it into the back of his throat. Still at the other side of the table, Anthony sort of hovers in place, hands raised but still like he isn’t quite sure

what to do.

Irrationally, the uncertainty irritates George. If it were Clay here, he wouldn't hesitate to scoot his chair over next to George, no matter how big of a scene he'd make. Or maybe he'd find some way to make an even bigger scene so that George didn't look like the idiot.

After what feels like half a lifetime, George pulls himself together on his own. "Sorry."

Anthony smiles at him with eyes that are perhaps kinder than George needs or deserves at the moment. "Should we get out of here?"

"Sorry for ruining the date," George says, sitting in the passenger seat.

Anthony shrugs. "Stop apologizing. You've clearly been having a hard time."

George doesn't say anything, lost in his thoughts, but he notices Anthony glancing at him now and then as he drives. The muscles in his arms flex and catch in the streetlight as he makes a turn and George finds himself admiring it in a very abstract sense.

In a perfect world, it would be him and Anthony, who is ideal in so many ways. Except for the one that counts the most.

When George still doesn't reply, Anthony says, "So, who is it that you're afraid of drifting apart from?"

"Someone important," George says, after a pause. "Someone I've known for a while. I don't know, maybe it is okay."

They brake at a stop sign and on a whim, George surges forward and kisses Anthony. He's clearly caught off-guard, but he places his hands awkwardly on George's shoulders. It's kind of nice, but then kissing in general is nice. George squeezes his eyes shut and tries to pull some enthusiasm out from deep inside him, but with his eyes shut like this, with Anthony's big hands around his shoulders, all it makes him think of is how it might feel to be kissed by—

George pulls away, or maybe it's Anthony who does. He has this unbearably kind look on his face, like he knows what's about to happen.

"I'm sorry," George says for what feels like the thousandth time that night. "I really am. This isn't fair to you."

"I get it," Anthony sighs. "Bad timing, huh?"

"I think so."

"Oh, well." Anthony looks like he wants to say more, but he seems to shake it off, shifting the car into drive. "I guess this is it, then?"

"Yeah," George says quietly. The road home is silent.

When he reaches the front door he's incredibly aware of the raw feeling around the edges of his eyes, his sniffing.

The door is unlocked when George opens it, even though it's almost dark out. He kicks his shoes off and sets his unused keys on the counter. Something about the metallic clatter makes all of the life leave his body. George slumps back against the door, and is suddenly so exhausted that he slides all the way down into a boneless pile right there.

He doesn't notice the feet sticking out from the end of the couch, nor the way they shift then disappear, at least not until Clay sits up and startles when he sees George with his forehead leaning against one forearm. His face sets into a scowl.

"That was quick," Clay snipes. George rolls his eyes.

"Yeah, so sorry." He lifts his head again and smiles a little, just to take the sting out of it. He could never stand when they were angry at each other. Clay's own face softens, although he doesn't move to come closer, and neither does George.

"Look," George says.

In the same moment, Clay blurts out, "I just wanted to—"

It all feels terribly out-of-sync. George motions for Clay to go ahead.

Hesitantly, he asks, "How was your date?"

He recognizes it for the olive branch that it is, and part of George is grateful, but at the same time, the last thing he wants is to have another blow-up. Not after today.

"It went fine," George says noncommittally, even though he knows that A. Clay knows him better than anybody else in the world, and B. he certainly knows him well enough to tell that he isn't telling the truth.

Sure enough, Clay scowls again. "No it didn't."

George stands up and makes his way to the kitchen. After a moment, he hears the shifting of Clay standing up and following him inside.

"Hey," Clay says. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." George looks through the fridge, even though he's the farthest thing from hungry right now.

"No you aren't. Why are you lying?"

"Look, I'm really not in the mood for this right now."

Right now, he feels the irresistible impulse to just...stick his head in the freezer. It seems like a nice and easy way to get out of the situation. But before he can do anything close to that, Clay groans. It's enough to make George want to start something, breakup and exhaustion and feelings be damned.

All he sees when he turns, though, is Clay slouched back on their kitchen counter, hands scrubbing at his face. When he catches George looking, he laughs thickly and crosses his arms in a subconsciously defensive gesture.

"Sorry," he says through a sigh, hissing out from between his teeth. "I'm not so used to—to *this*, just yet."

He wants so badly to coax Clay's arms away from his body, to stand in front of him and admit, *neither am I, and I don't ever want to be*. But he can't, he can't do that, so he goes for the next best thing. That turns out to be the truth.

"Anthony and I broke up tonight." George shuts the fridge door decisively. "That's all. I'm fine, I guess. Maybe I was overreacting, I don't know. But the date went badly, yes." He eyes Clay, who's watching him curiously, with trepidation. "Hey, say something."

Clay blinks some invisible haze out of his eyes. "I'm sorry, man. That really sucks."

"It does."

There's a pause, jagged and misplaced, like a streak of white through a finished portrait. Then Clay asks tentatively, "Do you want a hug?"

George weighs the options in his head for a second, but the same one wins out each time the question is ever on the table. He nods and Clay crosses the insurmountably large distance between them in less than three full strides.

Once, a long time ago, there was a time that Clay smelled distinct to George, a mix of the lavender shampoo he used and the fabric softener sheets he did his laundry with. But now, he smells like nothing at all to George. He remembers having read something about why you didn't smell like anything to yourself—the smell was so constant and so instantly recognizable to your brain that there was little point in experiencing it anew each time.

He supposes that that's what's happened with Clay. To somebody else, Clay probably still smells like lavender and fabric softener, but there are parts of Clay that are no longer distinct from himself.

It's nice, but also kind of painful.

Clay adjusts so that his hands are clutching around George's waist, and he presses his cheek to the top of his head.

"He didn't deserve you."

"Thanks," George mumbles, muffled in Clay's shirt.

"Why would anybody break up with *you*?" he says, voice so suddenly incredulous that it sends George into a fit of laughter.

"I wish I knew." He claps Clay on the shoulder and pulls away, content now that they've smoothed things over, at least temporarily. "Whatever. I'm hungry. Let's just order pizza for dinner. I just got dumped, so you're paying."

Before he can get too far, Clay holds him fast. "I'm serious." He stares right into George, gaze just a little too bare for him to stand for very long.

"Clay—"

He's stopped by Clay's hands coming up to the sides of his face, cradling his jaw with such tenderness that George loses the ability to speak for a moment. Clay's eyes flicker over each part of him, like he's committing it to memory, or maybe like he's searching for something that he isn't quite sure is there.

"I'm serious," Clay says again, voice just barely above a whisper. "You're—I don't know. You're a whole lot of things."

"I'm too much," George jokes, halfheartedly, because it's difficult to do anything but stare.

Clay shakes his head vehemently. His fingers burn brands into George's jaw. "You're everything."

It's too much. It's too too much. George doesn't even know how to quantify this anymore, how to define the aching in his chest in such a way that he can approach it without getting blasted off of his feet by the force of his longing. There is so much that he'd like to do with this moment. There is comparatively little that he actually can do. There is only one option that he'll truly let himself consider.

He steps back.

This is what frightens George the most. The possibility that Clay, confused by their proximity and unsure of their friendship, would mistake that for something else entirely. It scares him because right now, it's George's heart on the chopping block. So it hurts and everything in him is screaming for him to stay, but George pulls away nonetheless.

Clay's eyes shutter, the fragile *something* in his face crumbling like dry dirt. One of his hands lingers on the juncture of George's collarbone. Gently, he nudges it off, though it feels like he's wrenching off a limb of his own. It drops to Clay's side limply.

He can't bring himself to look at Clay, to take in the newest ways that he's overturned the most important parts of his life. Maybe they've reached the point of no return, or maybe they'd already done that ages ago, when they first moved into this shitty house and shared a bed and spent every waking hour with each other. He has to put a stop to this, to everything unsaid in Clay's heated stares and lingering touches, if he wants there to be anything left of the two of them.

"I can't," George says, at a loss for words, hoping that Clay will nevertheless understand. "What you're trying to do here, it's not something I can give you. I'm sorry."

Clay doesn't say anything, but George sees his hand flex and tighten on the kitchen counter.

"We're best friends. Roommates. I think somewhere along the way, we got turned around."

"Maybe we did," Clay says, absent-sounding.

George tries to fill the deafening silence. "See? If you had just let me pay you rent, none of this would have happened."

Clay lets out a short breath, like the leftovers of a real laugh. "Yeah, maybe. I think we just need some space."

It's nothing, and it's certainly nothing to fight or cry over, but to hear Clay himself admit what's been on both their minds for the past few weeks hurts so much worse than George anticipated it would.

"What does that mean?" He asks quietly. And maybe what George really means is *what does that mean for us?*

How am I supposed to do that?

Just once more, things go back to normal. Well, obviously not *normal*, but things settle into some version of normal where George and Clay are best friends and roommates and it ends there. Where George wakes up in a bed just as empty as it was when he went to sleep. The only sign of Clay in these mornings are the wrinkles in the pillowcase next to George's.

It's a rare day that he actually sees Clay for more than a minute or so, and it's even rarer that they'd stop and talk to each other when they do. George doesn't know whose fault this is. He imagines that this is what it would be like to be living with a ghost, seeing traces of another person all over the house but never the man himself.

It's waking up to the sound of the bedroom door shutting softly without so much as a goodbye. It's Patches yowling her head off at 7 in the afternoon because Clay's the one that's supposed to feed her dinner but he's having the fourth late night in a row. It's leftovers from George's meals disappearing mysteriously from the fridge by the next morning.

At least the ghost is polite enough to wash his own dishes. At least George can rest easy knowing that this is what's best for both of them, for Clay. At least this means that things are fixing themselves (even if it feels like the exact opposite is happening). At least—at least—

He doesn't feel the absence quite so keenly as when he finally gets the job offer from the brand in California, with a real contract and everything! George picks up his phone to call Clay before he stops and remembers.

He calls Nick instead.

"So like, you remembered, right?" Nick says as soon as he picks up.

George frowns. "Remembered what?"

Nick pauses, then says gravely, "George. You were told weeks ago."

"What? Wait, Nick—"

"Dude, my birthday." Nick's voice returns to normal.

George groans as he hears Nick laughing on the other side of the call. "Oh, what the fuck. You scared the shit out of me. I don't even remember why I called now."

"It'll come to you, I'm sure. But let's talk about me. You didn't actually forget, did you?"

"No, of course not. We're heading out as soon as Clay gets back."

"How is he, by the way?" Nick asks, like he's aware that he's stepping around landmines.

It's this question that makes George sit back in the uncomfortable dining room chair. How is he supposed to answer that?

Speak of the devil—the screen door clangs shut just as George opens his mouth to answer, and he hears the sounds of Clay kicking his shoes off by the door.

"He's here right now, if you want to ask him."

Clay sets his briefcase down on the kitchen counter and waves at George from a distance away. He points at the phone, raising an eyebrow. George mouths *Nick*, then hands the phone to him.

“Hey, Nick,” Clay calls, but stays a distance away at the kitchen counter. After a weird standoff that lasts less than a second, George brings the phone back up to his ear.

“Well, I hope that answered your question,” George says. He pulls up the email before he forgets again.

“Oh yeah, totally,” Nick says drily. Behind George, Clay traipses over and rummages through the fridge, and he’s right *there*, so frustratingly close that it makes George flush a little.

He clears his throat. “So anyway, I got the job!”

“Oh my god, you mean the one in—”

“—yeah, the one in Los Angeles—” Clay freezes stock-still behind him.

“Oh my god!” Nick yells, excited.

“I know, right? I’m like, a real adult, or something.”

“Gogy’s finally coming up.”

“As I should be,” George says loftily, and Nick laughs.

Some small noise makes him turn to see Clay staring over his shoulder at his laptop screen. It’s the look on Clay’s face—he doesn’t know how to describe it. Only a moment later, Clay notices him watching and gives a thumbs-up, face pulling into a horribly fake smile. Then he’s gone in a flash, and George is left wondering what it was that he missed.

“Sorry,” George says, interrupting Nick in the middle of his chatter. “I didn’t catch that—Clay just —” He isn’t quite sure to describe what Clay’s done. “He left in a bit of a hurry.”

“Are you guys...”

“I don’t know. Whatever the end of that question is, I don’t know. it might be horribly awkward at your party. Sorry.” Not for the first time, George feels like crying.

“That’s fine,” Nick says, terribly compassionate. “The upside of having a party outdoors is that there is no such thing as an awkward silence out there. And anyway, I’m not afraid to exile one or both of you to the car park, if it comes down to that.”

George’s laugh is still a little watery. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, yeah. Hope you two didn’t skimp out on the gifts—for the right price, I can forgive anything.”

“Right. Don’t worry.” He hears the sounds of Clay padding past the living room, and then the distant noises of the Subaru starting outside. “We’re about to leave now.”

“Okay, see you there then! Don’t be too hard on Clay. He’s also going through it.”

“I know,” George says. By god does he know. “See you there, I guess.”

The car ride to Neptune Beach is an existential nightmare. Well, it is for George, for whom the awkwardness makes him want to crawl out of his skin. Clay doesn’t seem to notice anything. If

anything he seems lost in his own world, somber eyes fixed on the highway.

George motions at the car radio. "Do you mind if I—"

"—oh yeah, sure."

They both reach for the knob at the same time, but then Clay jerks back and holds tighter on the steering wheel.

Neptune Beach is half an hour away from their house, and it's about twenty-nine minutes and forty-five seconds of torturous silence.

The upside is that Nick is right—it's almost impossible to sustain awkwardness in a place as beautiful as Neptune Beach on a cool afternoon. Anyway, there are enough other people there that Clay and George can get away with largely skirting around each other for much of their time.

George spends about twenty minutes in the water before he concludes that yes, he was right, he really isn't built for swimming. After a moment of deliberation, he steals Nick's beach towel and spends his time lying on there, nursing a sweet bottled cocktail.

When he drifts back into reality, there's a guy sitting cross-legged next to him with a guitar in his lap. In the distance are the sounds of their friends running around on the beach. George feels like he could pick out Clay's laughter even if he were standing back in the parking lot.

The guy with the guitar stops strumming. "Why the long face?"

George squints up at him through his sunglasses. He looks vaguely familiar. Maybe he was at George's birthday dinner. He has a pleasant, if slightly tired-looking, face and a pile of riotous brown curls ruffled by the sea breeze. With the guitar and everything else, he's cute in that emaciated hipster kind of way, if that's what you're into.

"Climate change. I dunno," George says.

"Funny." The guy strums a discordant chord.

"Sorry."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't—" But that's a lie. So George says, "I got dumped, recently." Then, it all sort of comes out. "And I think I might be losing my best friend, but maybe it's good that we're drifting apart? But I'm also kind of in love with him and I think he already knows this, or maybe it's just that he wants to experiment with me, but I can't do that. And I don't know what to do about any of it."

"Heavy," the guy says, then seems to struggle for anything else to say. George notices for the first time that he's also got a British accent.

"I guess," George sighs.

"You're one of Nick's friends, then? I'm Wilbur."

"George." They sit and watch everybody else in the water. "Nick knows way too many people."

"I'll say."

“So why aren’t you down there?” George asks.

Wilbur shrugs and points down at the guitar. “This is too expensive for me to be careless about water damage.”

“Can’t you put it away?”

“It’s like, eighty percent of my charm.”

George laughs despite himself and sits up to take a sip of his drink.

“This best friend of yours,” Wilbur broaches. “What’s the deal?”

“Just—just the usual straight guy stuff.” It hurts to reduce it down to that, but it hurts more to go any further.

“I feel that. Um...maybe you should talk to him?”

“Easier said than done.” George takes another swig of the cocktail and turns to Wilbur. “Hey, what can you play on that guitar anyway?”

“Hey,” Clay says. George startles a little.

Wilbur pauses his horrible country rendition of Wonderwall. “Hello, mate.”

“Hi, Clay,” George says, lifting his nearly empty cocktail bottle in greeting. “Hi. Did you have a good time in the water? You look like you did. Have fun in the water.”

“How sloshed are you?” Wilbur bursts into laughter like he isn’t feeling equally as giddy.

“I am not! How dare you?” George stands up, intending to saunter over the two steps that it takes to get to Wilbur and his dumb guitar, but he trips and almost takes a faceful of sand.

“Whoa there,” Wilbur says, catching him the split-second before disaster, almost dropping his guitar. “Chill. Relax. Sit down. Let me serenade you some more.”

Wilbur attempts to strum his guitar, but the noise comes out so mangled that it sends both of them into giggles again.

“Right,” Clay says flatly. He scrubs a hand through his hair and George is momentarily transfixed. And it’s not like they’ve never seen each other shirtless, or even naked, before. You can’t be best friends for over a decade without having accidentally walked into them stepping out of the shower once or twice or three times.

But maybe it’s the alcohol, maybe it’s the salty breeze and the whistling notes of the plover that turns George’s eyes onto the freckles on Clay’s chest, like the stars they watch on their roof. Or maybe it’s just the knowledge that by now, there’s no point in denying anything about how he feels.

“George, I actually came over here for a reason.”

“Which is?”

“I just need something from the car. Walk with me?”

“Ugh, if I have to.” But he stands again, more careful this time, and brushes the sand off of his shorts.

As the sun sets, the wind coming off the seafront is bracing enough that George sobers up seconds into the walk back up to the car park.

“I forgot my towel and all that,” Clay says by way of explanation. “Normally I’d be fine to dry off on my own, but I’m fucking freezing.”

George looks over and sees the goosebumps raised on Clay’s freckled shoulder blades, the way that he shivers when the saltwater in his hair drips down his back. And yet George somehow knows that if he were to feel, Clay would be warm to the touch.

He averts his eyes, struggles for something to say, but then Clay asks, “Who was that back there?”

“Uh—what?” George asks, caught off-guard.

“With the guitar. The guy you were hanging out with just now.”

“Oh, that was Wilbur. I think he was at my birthday dinner.”

Their flip-flops slap against the concrete. “You get along with him well.”

George pauses. “Yes?”

“Yeah.”

George narrows his eyes at Clay. “What’s on your mind?” he asks, semi-teasingly.

Clay shrugs and looks off in the distance at the sunset. “A lot. Missed chances, mostly.”

They reach the car and George fishes around in his pockets for the car keys.

Watching him struggle with the key to the trunk, Clay says, “I guess that’s good, that you get along with Wilbur well. If we’re you know. Putting some space between us.”

Clay’s jaw tightens as he frowns and all George can do is look on quietly as something inside him drags itself out of reach. Everything feels agonizing—the distance between them, the silence crammed full with things left unsaid.

Even from the car park, the sea still glitters in blue.

“That’s true,” George says. Clay is also watching the view, squinting in the setting sun.

Another breeze rushes by and Clay shivers violently. It’s enough to get George to snap out of it and unlock the trunk to grab his duffel bag.

“Here,” George says. He unzips it and hands a towel over to Clay, who thanks him through chattering teeth and runs it roughly over his hair.

When he closes the trunk, Clay is leaning against the car with the towel wrapped around his shoulders like a blanket, looking out over the horizon again wistfully.

“You know, I haven’t been to Neptune Beach since the day before I turned sixteen,” he says, unbidden.

“How specific.”

“You know why I remember? You called for the first time.”

“I did?” Then, George remembers. “Oh, I did.”

He’d switched out his and his mom’s SIM cards to do that, partly out of spite, but mostly because hers was the only data plan that included roaming. And then he’d mistimed the call so that instead of catching Clay the moment after midnight it had been midway through some family trip.

“We’ve come full circle, then,” George says, then wonders if maybe this isn’t exactly putting space between them. But Clay shifts and seems to lean toward him a little, like a sunflower to the sun. Even tipsy, George can still tell from the set of his shoulders that he is, for whatever reason, nervous.

His head spins with the possibilities. The consequences.

“The thing is,” Clay continues, oblivious to George’s mind racing a mile a minute, “When I look back at my life I think that I could place you at nearly every important moment. It’s weird, right? That we’ve gone from being half a world away from each other to being like this,” Clay crosses two fingers, “and now, and now—”

You’re everything.

Clay uncrosses his fingers and looks away.

The nice thing about being outside is that between the noise of the rushing tide and the cries of the seagulls and the roar of the wind, there is zero space for a tense silence. It’s what emboldens George to shift closer.

“I don’t want you to move out,” Clay says abruptly. The words seem to tumble out of his mouth, tripping over each other in their haste to be known, “I don’t—I don’t want you to take that job. In California. I feel horrible admitting it, but I don’t want you to go.”

“I—”

“Wait, sorry. I have to say this, otherwise I’m never going to say it and it’ll just be—well—”

Clay looks stricken. “I don’t want space.”

George feels his jaw slacken slightly and he crosses his arms. “What do you want, then?”

“You have no idea what I want.”

Except George is pretty sure that he does and in times past it’s taken all he has in him to say no to it. But this time, when George moves to take a step back, Clay follows with a step of his own, then another, grasping George by the bent points of his elbows, not forceful enough that George feels entrapped, but certainly firm enough that he is fully pulled into Clay’s orbit.

“Look,” Clay says, worrying at his bottom lip. This close, George can see the little dark scar from where he’d smacked his head into the kitchen cabinet. “I know you’re—I know things are changing, and I swear to God I’m fine with that. It’s just that it’s got me thinking. I don’t know why it’s taken me this long to figure it out, but I’ve realized that maybe we have less time together than I’d thought.”

George blinks and wonders at which point he'd gotten lost. Apparently it happens a lot with Clay. "I don't—"

"Yeah, I know, you don't. But I just...just let me do this. Let me make you feel good." His eyes shine gold in the slanting sun and out of some frantic energy from inside.

It's a testament to how well they know each other—or maybe, how many times they've reached this point only to immediately pull back—that George knows to shut his eyes as Clay leans in and hesitates, only a moment away from his lips. Then they're kissing, and, well—

It's equally as telling that George doesn't have enough sense this time around to pull his hand away from the flame, because for the first time he's seeing the beauty in being consumed like this.

What was the point of all this, again?

The point is—

The point is that the house—it's—

The point is that from the moment Clay touches his mouth to George's, it's terrifying and it's everything he's ever wanted.

They pull apart for air far too soon and Clay stares down at him like he doesn't dare believe it. Face flushed, he pants, "I've always wanted to do that."

Before either of them can spare a second thought, George slings his arms around Clay's neck and pulls him in again.

The point is that Clay kisses like the blaze of a wildfire and the gentle warmth of a shared bed. That, in running his tongue over George's bottom lip, he's desperately pushing across every single unspoken secret putting this terrible distance between them.

The point is, standing on Neptune Beach with sand in between his toes and the wind in his hair and Clay's back under his fingers (and their lips pressed together), George thinks he *finally* understands.

He pulls away, smiling and newly-enlightened. "I've been an idiot."

Clay frowns. George kisses him again, tries his best to put everything he hasn't been able to say into this one wordless gesture.

There's more of you in my life than anybody else.

I don't ever want to be used to anything that isn't you and me.

Maybe I've loved you for years and I've only just found out. Isn't that something?

This time, when they detach, Clay is openly watching him like he's a wondrous thing.

"First of all," George says, a little out of breath. "I'm not going anywhere."

"But, California—"

"—is a job that I can do from home."

"Oh," Clay says. His shoulders relax. "Jesus. Well, why didn't you say so earlier?"

“I didn’t know you thought that! Until like, two minutes ago.” George laughs, feeling giddy. “You thought I was leaving?”

“What was I supposed to think? You’re the one that’s always talking about rent, or whatever the fuck.”

“Yeah, because I feel like a freeloader.”

“As if we haven’t lived together for years now. You’re my best friend, George. Why *wouldn’t* I live with you?”

“Just a friend?” George says without thinking. Fuck it. No better time to lay all the cards on the table than right now, freshly kissed in the parking lot of a public beach. “I could never have left you. Like, for the record. I don’t think I know how.”

Clay looks stunned at the admission and George feels a blush settle over his face. Before he can turn away, Clay rests his cool fingertips on his cheek.

“I need to know what you’re saying. I need to know for sure,” Clay says. “If I’m wrong about this, then I don’t know what I’ll do.”

You never could stand to be wrong. “I’m in love with you.” George smiles and links his fingers in with Clay’s hand, bringing it down from his cheek. “I’m in love with you and I’ve been thinking about kissing you for ages. We sleep in the same bed together, we share a garden and a cat and a life, and it drives me mad that that’s where we’ve stopped.”

“Oh,” Clay says. He raises their linked hands to his mouth and presses a kiss there. George’s heart literally floats out of his chest. “I think I get it, now.”

“Were you right?”

Clay smiles, wider and wider until he laughs and presses his forehead against George’s. In the setting sun, he glows. “Yeah.”

“Oh, look who decided to show up,” Nick calls when George and Clay make it back to the beach. He jogs up to them. In the time that they’d been gone, a bunch of people have since congregated around a campfire further up the shore, a little ways behind the three of them. He can hear Wilbur on his guitar there. “What were you even doing that took so long? Terrorizing children? Making out?”

He looks to Clay, waiting to back up his answer, but Clay’s looking right back at George and biting back a grin. George’s eyebrows raise wordlessly and he hits Clay on the arm.

“What? We were—uh—” Clay laughs nervously and shifts backward, like he’s trying to somehow hide. Nick looks way too amused with everything that’s happening.

“You *were*! I totally called it,” he says.

“Oh my god.” George rolls his eyes and grabs Clay’s hand, marching them both past Nick. “It’s none of your business what we—what we were or were not doing.”

Clay’s wheezing laugh is bright and warm and it matches perfectly with the gentle rush of the waves.

Later that night, they're lying in bed, staring at their popcorn ceiling yet again. More out of habit than anything else, there's about a foot of space between them.

"Hey," Clay whispers, out of the blue. "You awake?"

George rubs his eyes. "Yeah."

"Earlier, when you said I didn't feel the same. You had it backwards. I'm the one that's been in love with you." Hearing it still sends a little thrill through George. "I thought you knew and you didn't feel the same, and that's why you were being...off."

"Excuse me?" George turns to face Clay. "The audacity. I was being 'off' because you were being a dick!"

"I was being a dick because I was in love with you!"

"Wait, so," George thinks for a second. "That time when Nick came to visit, after my date, when you stormed upstairs. That was because...you were jealous?"

Clay is silent for a long enough time that it starts turning funny for George. "Yes."

"Oh my god." George laughs as Clay shoves his head under his pillow.

"Stop," He says, voice muffled. When George keeps laughing, Clay groans and rolls away from him.

"Hey, no, come back." George shuffles across their bed—their king-sized mattress—and drapes himself over Clay, who flops over obligingly. "You're so overdramatic. I really should've figured this out earlier."

"If you're just going to bully me—"

"I'm done now, I promise."

His eyes adjust to the half-darkness and there's Clay, head pillowed on his arm, staring at George in a sweet, satisfied way that he's sure has to be on his own face as well.

George kisses him again, just because he can. They take their time, Clay's lips pushing against his softly.

"I love you," Clay blurts out the moment they part. They're smiling at each other like a pair of idiots.

"I love you too. I don't think I'll ever get used to hearing that, or saying that," George says, settling into Clay's side.

"Well," his hand comes up around George's upper arm, "we have time enough to see."

Chapter End Notes

some notes about the writing of this fic:

- the layout of this house is based off of a real airbnb listing i saw when i was in Baltimore two years ago. i could not believe what i was seeing. unfortunately, i can't find the listing anymore, but it is forever immortalized in this fic.
- almost all information about Florida is made up. there is no real estate bubble in jacksonville that i know of, but it's like...a big city...so i ASSUME that rent is high there. maybe. sorry Florida
- also, halfway through writing i realized that dream may not actually live in jacksonville but whatever . fiction, babey!

i'm thinking about writing some more short add-ons to this--like i found out recently that george also has a cat! mayhaps a dnf gay cat dads one-shot?

thank you guys so much for reading!! this was so much fun to write and i'm looking forward to doing more :D. whatever you celebrate, happy holidays and stay safe!

p.s. during neptune beach, i was physically restraining myself from adding another cody ko reference. whoever is the first to correctly guess which joke i was thinking of gets a free dnf one-shot request from me lol.

edit 12/30/2020: icb i'm actually writing this. congrats to ao3 user speechdisorder for correctly guessing "blue ass water"! . expect a one-shot of your request within 15 business days.

tysm for all the nice comments btw! i've been really bad about replying, but each and every one has put a smile on my face n i truly appreciate them.

End Notes

thank you so much for reading! also, i love reading comments, they feed me serotonin in a way that the cold machinations of the kudos button can never seem to do. this is the first male slash fic i've written since like...2017, so i appreciate any constructive feedback too! either way pwease comment to feed the little monkey that controls my brain :D

come find me on [tumblr](#)!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!